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## *Anniversary Discourse*

### ASPECTS OF A PHILOSOPHY OF GOVERNMENT IN A SICK WORLD\*

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When Dr. Hartwell and Dr. Pool invited me to speak here this evening, they suggested that I might talk upon some aspects of the relation between the medical profession and the community. They supplied me with a collection of pamphlets and reports and reprinted addresses dealing with medicine in its public relations. I read them diligently. But the more I thought about the questions at issue, the more uneasy I became. For I realized that I did not really understand them and that all I could hope to do was to enlighten you about the extent of my own ignorance. At this point I began to wonder wistfully whether the Ethiopian war might not require my presence in London or Geneva or Addis Ababa tonight; for this seemed a not wholly unconvincing way of letting the Academy of Medicine solve its problems without my assistance.

I am making this confession of embarrassment and cowardice because it enables me to boast about my sudden discovery of a triumphant solution of this predicament. If I were a politician, I said to myself, I should, of course, have to act as if I knew the answer to every problem: what politician has ever admitted that he did not know the answers to anything? Perhaps if I were a commentator on current affairs I could not escape expressing an opinion

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even if I were not entitled to an opinion. But surely, I thought, in a gathering of medical men it will be easy to say candidly that there are aches and ills which flesh is heir to that even the best physician does not understand and cannot cure. After that I felt at ease. It is a great relief to come from the world of public affairs, where no one dares to admit that he does not know, where no one ever admits that he has made a mistake, where no one ever admits that he is puzzled, into a world where it is respectable and honorable and safe to put aside the pretension of infallibility and of omniscience.

I should like to discuss an aspect of the philosophy of government in a disordered world. Philosophy is perhaps too pretentious a name: what I have in mind is an attitude towards government which, when it becomes articulate and explicit, may be dignified as a philosophy.

In the realm of government, whether a man is simply an interested citizen or an active politician, or a responsible official, or a student and thinker, the subject matter is complex, it transcends his personal observation and experience, it comprises an extraordinarily large number of intricately related variable elements. In order to think about politics at all, in order to make public affairs comprehensible to the human mind, men have to create for themselves some kind of mental image, some sort of model, some hypothetical pattern which is simpler and more familiar than the reality which William James used to call the buzzing, blooming confusion of the actual world. It is beyond the power of ordinary minds—I am tempted to say that it is beyond the power of any mind—to deal continually and effectively with the data of experience in all their raw, heterogeneous fullness.

At different times in the course of history men have used different images to represent to themselves the social order in which they live. One of the oldest and most persistent of these images is derived from the patriarchal family; the relation between the ruler and his subjects is conceived as similar to that between the patriarch and his children.

Then there is the image derived from war: the ruler's relation to his subjects is conceived as the relation between the chieftain and his warriors. This, incidentally, is a social image which has recently had a spectacular recurrence in the fascist states of Europe. Again and again, from the time of the Graeco-Roman thinkers, men have at certain times conceived society as a body politic in which each class, each rank, was an essential member. Usually the current image has been an imitative reflection of the accepted or dominant science of the age. Thus in the Eighteenth Century, the profound impression made upon men by the Newtonian conception of the physical world was carried over into politics, and men conceived society as a system of forces. Our own constitutional system was devised by men who had the daring to conceive a federal republic in which the states would remain as distinct as the separate planets and as unified as the solar system. In the Nineteenth Century, the Darwinian imagery took possession of many political thinkers: economic competition and the imperialist competition of national states were regarded as illustrations of the struggle for existence of a surplus population in an insufficient environment and of the survival of those most fitted to survive.

Now in our own day a different image has taken possession of many influential minds. Let us call it the image of the statesman as engineer. It is not hard to account for its popularity and persuasiveness. The most obvious triumphs of modern man, those which are most easily appreciated, are his great buildings, his great ships, his great machines, his great tunnels, dams, canals. Mankind has been profoundly impressed with the contrast between the efficiency of these engineering works as compared with the inefficiency of statesmen, of financiers, and of business men. The engineer, it seems, is able to achieve what he sets out to achieve. He can plan and he can carry out his plan. He knows what he is doing and he does it.

So the idea took hold that society might be run by engineers, might be deliberately constructed according to a plan and then operated as efficiently as a great machine.

When I was a young man, Mr. H. G. Wells was the prophet of this vision, and there were few in my generation who were not spellbound by the idea that if only we could get rid of politicians and of competitive business men and turn society over to the engineers, a clean, orderly, efficient and gracious civilization would be brought into being. This vision, if you will remember, played an immense part in the early enthusiasm for Mr. Hoover. Around 1920 he was hailed by many of us as the ideal ruler of men because he was not a politician but an engineer, though today, such is the changeableness of men, he is criticized precisely because he is not a politician. In the post-war era the image of the engineer seems to have taken hold not only of the best minds of the Republican Party in America but of the best minds of the Communist Party in Russia. One of the chief reasons why Soviet Russia has exerted such attraction upon so many men is that the planned economy of Russia seemed to be an example, the first in history, of the application of engineering principles to human society. There were several years, I should say roughly from the crash of 1929 to the end of 1933, from the breakdown of prosperity to the beginning of recovery, when the ideal of an engineered and planned economy had almost completely captured the imagination of the Western World. Everyone who raised his voice talked about planning something, the Chamber of Commerce, the heads of big corporations as well as the New Dealers and the Progressives. No doubt they had different ideas of how to plan and what to plan for, but the underlying image dominated most minds. The notion finally reached its grand climax, and its *reductio ad absurdum*, in the vogue of technocracy.

The point I wish to make is that the conception of government as a problem in engineering is a false and misleading conception, that the image of the engineer is not a true image of a statesman, and that society cannot be planned and engineered as if it were a building, a machine, or a ship. The reason why the engineering image is a bad image in politics, is a bad working model for political thought, is a bad pattern to have in mind when dealing with politi-

cal issues is a very simple one. The engineer deals with inanimate materials. The statesman deals with the behavior of persons.

A mode of thought appropriate to the organization of inanimate elements cannot be applied successfully to the organization of animate ones. It is as radical a misconception as would be the attempt to become an architect by studying music or a horticulturist by studying astronomy. The engineer who plans a building can calculate the weight which his steel will sustain. But he does not have to consider whether his girders and his bricks will renew their vitality from day to day and reproduce their kind from generation to generation. Nor does he have to consider whether they will be willing to hang together in the structure into which he has put them, whether the girders, for example, will grow weary of supporting the bricks, and begin to have purposes which he did not assign to them when he made his plan.

Surely it is almost self-evident that if, as an instrument of political thinking, we must have a working image derived from some more familiar discipline, then it is to the biological sciences that we must look for an analogy. Since the statesman deals with living things, he had better take his analogies and his inspiration from those who deal with living things, from farmers, and animal trainers, and teachers, and physicians rather than from astronomers, and engineers and architects. For analogies, images, working hypotheses, patterns, whatever you choose to call them, which come from man's dealings with the world of living organisms will at least have the virtue of keeping vividly in his mind a sense of what he is handling. Governing is an art. It requires, as all arts do, a sense of touch, an intuitive feeling for the material, a kind of sixth sense of how it will behave.

The masters of any profession know something more than it is possible to communicate; they are so sympathetically at one with their subject that instinctively they possess the nature of it. Before they have reasoned consciously, they

have smelt, have felt, have perceived what it is and what to do. It used to be said that you did not have to be in the ring with Jack Dempsey for fifteen rounds in order to learn that he was a champion. Likewise, the master of a subject, whether he is a carpenter or the rider of a horse, a diagnostician or a surgeon, will quickly disclose in the inevitable emergencies of any human activity whether he possesses that intimate feeling, that flair, that uncalculated aptitude which distinguishes the first-rater from the second-rater.

Now among public affairs as elsewhere, since everything cannot be reasoned out *a priori* in each emergency, it is of the utmost importance that the political tradition of a country should predispose men towards a true and reliable sense of how living men in a living society behave. That is why the dominant imagery is so important.

The image of a planned and engineered society has the effect, I believe, of destroying the intuitive feeling for what society actually is and of the sense of touch in dealing with human affairs. The grosser consequences of it are evident enough: in the supreme impertinence with which communist and fascist states treat human beings as if they were animate materials to be fabricated by the dictators; in the ruthlessness with which they cut human nature to the shape they desire and nail together in designs of their own the living spirits of men. This notion that society can be engineered, planned, fabricated as if men were inanimate materials becomes in its extremist manifestations a monstrous blasphemy against life itself. It can also take milder forms which merely produce temporary confusion and inconvenience as in the fantastic attempts, now happily concluded, to write in three or four months some five hundred codes for the detailed conduct of all business throughout continental America.

The man who approaches public life with a feeling for living organisms will not fall into the illusion of thinking he can plan or fabricate or engineer a human society. He will have the more modest aim of defending it against the

invasion of its enemies and of assisting it to maintain its own balance.

Remembering that a society is an association of living persons, and not an arrangement of inanimate materials, he will never imagine that he can impose upon those living persons and their descendants his private preferences. He will recognize that the function of government is not to decide how men shall live, what kind of men they shall be, what they shall spend their energies upon. Government cannot direct the life of a society. Government cannot shape the destiny of the human race.

There are some who think that government should use all its powers of coercion to make the social order correspond with their own ideal of a nobler and more satisfying social order. But this is as if a doctor dealt with a patient on the assumption that he must use drastic medicine if he finds that his patient is not as strong as Hercules, as beautiful as Apollo, and as wise as Zeus. He would be an absurd doctor. The sound physician, I take it, is not attempting to make a superman out of his patient. He takes measures to protect him against the invasion of hostile bodies. He cultivates habits which improve his resistance. He intervenes with medicines and surgery when he thinks he can assist the patient in recovering his own equilibrium. Always, if I understand the faith of the physician, he regards himself not as the creator, designer and dictator of the nature of man but as the servant and the ally of nature. There are times to be sure when his patient is prostrate and the doctor must be the master of his whole regime. But even in these times, the good doctor will be continually seeking for ways, not to make a new man of his patient but to encourage those recuperative powers which may at last enable the patient to walk again on his own feet.

There is a vast difference between those who, as engineers dealing with inanimate materials, can dictate to nature and those who, as physicians dealing with living organisms, must respect nature and assist her. My thesis is that statesmen had better think of themselves as physicians who assist

society than as engineers who plan and fabricate it. They will understand these problems better if they realize that society has not been invented or constructed by any man or any set of men but is in fact the result of the infinitely complex adaptations by innumerable persons through countless generations. Its destiny is beyond the power of the human mind to imagine it. Its reality is complex beyond the mind's power to grasp it. Its energies are beyond the power of any men to direct it. Society can be defended. Its adjustments can be facilitated. Its various purposes can be clarified, enlightened, and accommodated. Its aches and pains can in some measure be relieved. But society is not and never will be a machine that can be designed, can be assembled, can be operated by those who happen to sit in the seats of authority.

To know this, to realize the ultimate limitations of government, and to abide by them, is to have that necessary humility which, though for the moment it is at a discount in many parts of the globe, is nevertheless the beginning of wisdom. Without it men will use political power for ends that government cannot realize, and in the vanity of their delusions fall into all manner of cruelty, disorder, and waste. They will have forgotten to respect the nature of living things, and in their ambition to be as gods among men they will affront the living god. They will not have learned that those who would be more than human end by being less than human.

